



AN IZURU KAMUKURA ZINE



emptiness joy

an izuru kamukura zine

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a thank you from the mods

it's been a wonderful honour and rewarding experience to be able to work on this project. i'd like to thank everyone who has contributed for helping turn this dream into a reality.

most of all, i'd like to thank a friend close to my heart for giving me the opportunity to work on this. being able to support him through this journey has been wonderful, and most of all i'd like to thank him for reigniting my passion for writing and for this fandom. he's been an incredible friend to me, and without his determination and dedication this project wouldn't have been nearly as amazing as it is. thank you everyone, and thank you to nancy and mai.

-jack (matsukomas)

this zine was the first i ever modded, and it's my pleasure to present it to you. i'm so proud of my amazing mods and contributors and i hope you will be too!

i'd like to give an extra special thanks to jack for sticking with me through thick and thin, mai for helping us put this all together, all of our wonderful contributors for their enthusiasm and brilliant hard work, my mum for being my emotional support, general advisor and treasured packing assistant, everyone at cala, and the brain trauma foundation, who we're raising money for, for the incredible research they do.

i'd also like to thank you. your love and passion for kamukura made all of this possible, and for that you'll eternally have my gratitude. never change!

-nancy (nancymorons)

hey! i'm only the formatter of this zine. however witnessing the dedication of the mods to this project has been inspiring. it is evident lots of love was poured into every piece for this zine. qith that, i hope i have brought the mods, nancy and jack, as well as the contributors, a sense of pride when they flip through this zine. i hope everyone can see that i wholeheartedly enjoyed every moment formatting for this zine! thank you so much nancy for bringing me onto this project!

-mai (adrem0ra)







boiling point

by magi

When put in a life-or-death situation, those involved experience an acute stress response. This response consists of the sudden release of hormones, activating the body's sympathetic nervous system. Then, the adrenal glands are stimulated, triggering the release of catecholamines.

This chain of reactions causes an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate. It is also known as the fight-or-flight response.

The question is: when the option of escape is taken away or compromised, will the subject default to fight?

He supposed that was what Junko Enoshima expected. For the most part, she had gotten what she wanted.

The student council had torn itself apart at a rapid pace. Once one turned on the others, soon after did most of them turn against one another. There were still some that cowered and hid, defending themselves in a purely reactive way. Screaming and begging, flailing their weapons so uselessly before being struck down.

Predictable, Izuru Kamukura had thought. In the end, the one who survived had completely given himself into violence and brutality. *So predictable*.

If this was supposed to be entertaining, then...*what?*

*Despair is supposed to be **different**, is it?*

In the end, there were a bunch of dead bodies and one other bloodied, broken individual. As an observer, the carnage was *meaningless*. The supposed survivor was cackling with victory, but if he were to leave, he would never return to whatever life he lived before.

There was no point to any of this beyond the cruelty. Kamukura still felt hollow. Empty.

That broken, desperate, blood-soaked boy charged at him and Kamukura reacted fast. He shoved the boy back and watched impassively as he hit the wall hard enough to fracture bones and landed on his own chainsaw.

It was violent. It was vile. Kamukura still hadn't felt anything resembling relief.

Why did I even bother?

He wondered that, and he couldn't come to an answer. How strange, but strange in a way that was just unpleasant.

Despair is supposed to be different. She said that despair was the cure to her apathy.

She tricked me.

In that second-long realization, the boy pulled the trigger.

Worthless. *Meaningless*. Even if he landed his shot, he still would've died. There hadn't been any logical point to firing.

And yet.

Kamukura hadn't completely dodged, the bullet slicing a thin line along his cheek. His breath caught. His heartbeat had spiked. Peripheral blood vessels constricted. Blood pumped through muscle, and his blood dripped down his jaw.

That boy looked at him with such desperation, and then he died. His last moments had been so *defiant*.

The security camera had caught everything.

She tricked me, he thought. *All of this was a farce.*

And yet.

As he wiped the blood away, he registered the sting. It may not have been the first time he had gotten used. He had been *designed* to serve the academy's lofty goals and ideals, but it *was* the first time he had been hurt like this in memory.

Izuru Kamukura looked at the camera.

The faculty is going to be displeased, he thought.



One important aspect of the project was the necessity of confidentiality. For obvious reasons, there would be large-scale backlash were details of the project ever leaked to the public. As proud and as tall as Hope's Peak Academy stood, such a blow to its reputation could cause it to topple. Or so it was believed by the faculty.

With the massacre of the student council, the staff was thrown into hysterics. With her spreading footage taken from the Incident,

the staff had gotten driven into a corner.

As matters stood, they expected him to be on the down-low. The only reason he hadn't been terminated when they found him was due to hesitation to waste all the resources that went into bringing the project to completion.

And perhaps because they thought they could cover it up by hiding him elsewhere in one of the other labs. Unfortunately, he knew that wretched girl would not be so easily thwarted.

Which left him—with *what*, exactly?

He was still in a largely empty room like before. And this time, if he left, he would not have a place to return to.

She got what she wanted from him. Hope's Peak Academy would not stand for much longer. With them gone, so too would be the reason for his existence.

The faculty was going to fail in their attempts to cover up the Incident. Hope's Peak Academy was destined for collapse.

So, then, what was going to become of him?

Will they attempt to terminate me first? He wondered.

He waited for the fear response. An accelerated heart rate. A sharp intake of air. His muscles tightening. The fear that would be suited to before when that bullet grazed him open. Instead, that possibility washed over him so dully, like the lightest sprinkle of rain.

How boring. I still don't feel afraid enough to want to leave.

He rubbed at his cheek, at where the cut had long healed completely. There wasn't going to be another scar, and when he was to be terminated, it was going to be quick and perfunctory.

I can't be bothered to think about it any longer.



She said despair was unpredictable.

With the increasing chaos and turmoil, his termination was soon to come. As his inevitable death drew nearer, he found himself looking back. As not much had happened, he of course thought about the Incident.

Despair is chaos. By definition, chaos is unpredictable. Except she expected it to go a certain way from the start.

That wretch had set up the conditions for a killing game. There was nothing surprising when the killing game then *occurred*. There was a moment where perhaps it may not have. There was a person who spoke up. This person calmed most of the students down with his straightforward and earnest words.

That person had unsurprisingly been the student council president, but even he could not fully control the violent impulses of his peers. Once one of them started killing, they all came toppling down.

It would be ridiculous to feel betrayed. She hadn't made herself a trustworthy person at any point. He hadn't taken her offer because he trusted her, but because he was curious about her. Everything fell apart, everyone tore themselves apart just as she had planned, and she hadn't experienced a single second of disappointment.

He watched everything unfurl as she had wanted and he still felt numb for almost all of it. He could shut his eyes and re-experience all the senseless bloodshed and violence and would still feel nothing.

It was only when he remembered the look on the person who futilely tried to shoot at him that he paused.

Someone marked for death. What had he been thinking? Was it delusion? Spite? Or did he not want to die alone?

He looked at his hand. Held it out like he had when he pushed that person. Curled his fingers. Imagined tearing through flesh and bone with ease.

I could kill her, he thought. I could kill her and I could wipe out everyone else. I could save myself with ease.

...

*Would I **enjoy** doing that?*

His hand dropped.

I don't think I would. That girl had first attempted to appeal to me using our supposed similarities, but I'm not anything like her at all. I didn't enjoy any part of that.

In fact, I hated what I saw.

Right now, the reserve course was surely rioting with everything they had. Even without her at the helm, they were angry enough to destroy Hope's Peak Academy brick by brick. They felt justified, considering the broken dreams and promises that they claimed the academy peddled to them. Obviously, they were angry. It had only

been only a matter of time before they snapped.

The faculty had called them parasites. It would not be surprising, then, that the reserve course would end up bleeding them dry. It wasn't a surprise at all that the reserve course would drag the academy down.

She knew that. She banked on it. She used their fury to further her goals of destruction. The student council was sacrificed for that.

And they had fought so hard to survive. For nothing. Their fates were sealed the second he had walked in.

*She used me. Used them. All of that bloodshed was just a **bonus**.*

He still felt so hollow. But if that were truly the case, why were his hands squeezing into such tight fists? Why were his teeth grinding themselves to dust? Like a tightly wound coil, his body felt close to bursting.

He remembered—something. A remnant of parasitic mediocrity. A bone-deep feeling of dissatisfaction and desperation. A desire to give up everything—or, perhaps, to tear everything apart.

The world is not harmonious.

That thought came with a white-hot flash of vitriol.

It was destined for destruction.

You just wanted to seize control of that inevitability for your own amusement. For that purpose, you found me to use. Because I didn't care, I allowed it. I didn't...

Kamukura twitched. He shut his eyes tightly.

He could still see the bloodshed. That mutual massacre. That despair, that desperation. He could still hear the broken laughter and how his cheek stung afterward.

His eyes snapped open.

*I didn't **want** any of that to happen.*



At some point, he had gone to sleep.

He was in a bloodied, destroyed classroom. He could hear laughter. It was her laughter. The bodies were writhing, dripping

with an odious black fluid as they shambled towards him. They were laughing, but the laughter was tinged with sobs.

They were begging for salvation.

He was frozen. They crawled up to him, but the black blurred in with the dark suit he wore.

They were begging for salvation.

He couldn't move.

They **forced his jaw open** and *then—*

He woke up in a cold sweat dampening the sheets on his bed. He inhaled sharply. If he focused, he could hear the screaming. The screaming of rioters. The panicking of the staff. Her laughter.

He didn't want to think, and yet.

She tricked me. She used me. She showed me that even despair wouldn't be enough to alleviate the emptiness of my existence.

I should repay her for that.

Nausea built up in his gut. His mouth was already damp with saliva. His hands were shaking. He needed to throw up.

It was the first time he ever felt so sick.

Before I die, I'll drag her down.

He wondered if this is what that broken boy with the chainsaw thought. He wondered if this was how the reserves felt. Perhaps. Perhaps not.

What did it *matter* if it was?

It was how *he* felt.

I'll drag them all down.







end and beginning

by kimium

If Kamukura were asked to describe the room, which he wasn't but he was going to give his thoughts regardless, he'd call it a time capsule of human folly mixed with the uncomfortable, heavy smell of blood. Push anyone to the brink, give them a target, sprinkle a pinch of motivation, and an emotional outburst would sloppily come together like a child's first attempt at folding origami. After all, actions always desire the crutch of justification.

Enoshima's grand plan was slowly becoming boring. Her plan's grand opening scene was predictable, following the script with blind devotion. Blood, thick with iron and despair, coated the walls of the school in violent bursts of red, like paint splatters on a dirty canvas. Weapons dripped with blood, adding to the red splatter, drooling like a savage predator hunting its prey.

Then again, weren't all weapons merely tools of inelegant butchery?

Metal snapped against itself and the roar of a motor echoed in the classroom. Kamukura turned his head. Beyond broken desks, splattered walls, and stiffening dead bodies stood a boy. Though calling him a "boy" was generous. With wide eyes, a dark glazed over expression, and a blood splattered smile on top of a blood matted uniform he was as mindless as the weapon in his hand. Said weapon, a chainsaw, was the source of the grinding metal sound.

Chainsaws were, in Kamukura's opinion, one of the most vicious weapons. Not that others weren't capable of malice - with enough intent and searing anger anything could be used to kill. However, unlike other weapons that required skill to use, chainsaws were an exception. Brazenness was the only component required because chainsaws didn't beat around the bush. Instead, chainsaws loudly announced their intentions like a trumpet blaring before war: metal glinted wickedly in a mockery of blades that samurai had carted around in a time long forgotten, and the mechanical parts screeched their war cries.

A feral growl escaped the boy's lips. Kamukura watched dispassionately as the boy moved closer, weapon raised, the blade pointing like a guide. A second later he swung the blade. Kamukura moved, his arm automatically connecting with the boy's torso. A guttural gasp escaped the boy's lips as he flew across the room hitting the wall with a loud thump. The chainsaw clattered noisily to the floor, still buzzing. Then the boy fell forward. The chainsaw bit into the boy's flesh and carted through muscle with the grace of a wild animal. Blood spurted, spraying out with dramatic flair, staining the skin and collar of the uniform. The body twitched, the last electrical pulses making the limbs dance with the dying embers of life. Blood began to pool in a viscous puddle, appearing darker than normal in the dimly lit room.

Disgusting. This was what Enoshima called Despair? Despair born from human fear regarding an unpredictable future? Kamukura pulled his lips into a thin grimace. At best he'd label the situation a tragedy, like the epics from the past, and move on. After all, a mountain of death was just that: a mountain of death.

Turning, Kamukura started to head to the exit but was stopped when a loud bang split the air. Out of the corner of his eye something flew towards him. Kamukura leaned to the side. A dull kiss of cold metal and the sting of injury sharply flooded his senses. The smell of copper and iron waffled in the air. Kamukura lifted his hand and pressed it to his cheek. His fingers quickly became sticky with blood. He pulled his hand away and redirected his gaze. Smoke rose from the gun, lying in a cold, limp hand. Blank eyes stared at him, desperation hollowly staring back, forever etched on his face like a photograph of his last moments.

Kamukura raised an eyebrow. Was this perhaps what Enoshima meant by showing him something interesting? That somehow, he'd think this grotesque display of violence mixed with swirling human emotions fascinating? That this charade was somehow unpredictable and mixed with despair?

A blip of warmth pulsed weakly in his chest. Kamukura's lips twisted slightly, disdain bitterly filling his mouth. How barbaric. Kamukura left the building into deafening silence.

Moonlight danced along Kamukura's face along with a whisk of crisp night air and the bite of blood. The cool tang of spring, the beginnings of greenery and wet gravel from sanding the roads during winter, danced across his nose. The lingering promise of rain mixed with the dusty brick of the walkway and Hope's Peak Academy's buildings. Under the silver moonlight the metal of the Academy's entrance gleamed coldly.

Kamukura wrinkled his nose at the pungent mix of nature, humanity, and urbanization. Looking upward, Kamukura took a second to study the twinkle of stars scattered amongst the inky swirls of the night sky.

"How boring," he muttered.

He exited the academy.



Kamukura wove between buildings, watching fire and smoke billow in a thin haze of destruction. The pavement was roughly split open with debris and broken glass scattered like flower petals. Shouts mingled with the smoke as people scurried like ants, clutching weapons with a bone white grasp. In the distance, Kamukura spotted some black and white bears—the Monokumas dancing. The budding seeds of chaos had erupted, triggering a chain reaction. If Enoshima was present she'd gleefully call it Despair.



Kamukura called it ordinary, predictable, and boring. Unless something special emerged from the flames and ash that filled the sky, like a diamond forged under extreme heat and pressure. Maybe he'd never witness the vision Enoshima had promised him in that small, dark room.

Perhaps all Kamukura required was patience. Hope and despair were fickle mistresses who did not bow to anyone's will. Not that it mattered in the end. After all, it wasn't as though he was lacking time now that the world had fallen into chaos.

Pressing onward, Kamukura passed the ruined streets and wove through narrow alleys filled with questionable dark plastic bags. He continued until he exited into an open square sandwiched between two tall buildings.

Before the world had fallen into chaos, the buildings would have stood silently behind a backdrop of people busily passing and cars driving. The square itself was paved with concrete broken by unattended flower beds and trees. Moving further the flat space smoothly transitioned into a gentle slope of stairs to the main street, Kamukura crossed the square and walked down the stairs. At the bottom was a wheelbarrow, which he took. The metal frame creaked and the wheels turned achingly slow, but Kamukura pushed steadily.

Crossing the street diagonally, Kamukura cut through a barren park towards Towa Tower. Circling around the side of the building, Kamukura immediately spotted the glossy metal heads of two bears. One all white and the other all, Shiro and Kurokuma. As he moved closer, Kamukura spotted the glimmer of their metal parts trailing around their heads.

Picking both heads up, ignoring the dark, glossy dead eyes, Kamukura set them in the wheelbarrow and continued on his way. Soon the path straightened and besides debris and sections of uneven pavement, the path was clear.

Daybreak slowly crept into the sky, painting it a soft blue with hints of yellow in a silent symphony if not for the metal clinking dully as the wheelbarrow shifted. As the sun's rays touched the bear's heads a weak flicker of light began to emit from their eyes. Soon, they began to speak, their distorted voices ringing from battered speakers. Their voices grew louder, prattling on. Their tone was filled with mocking, sinister pleasure that oozed blackened despair as they mused over the result of their carefully crafted plan failing.

Distasteful. Disgusting. Boring. All the people needed was a leader to guide them correctly before her plans crumbled. Not that Kamukura was surprised. As if her plans had been anything less than a sham. Kamukura paused, stopping the wheelbarrow in its tracks. The bears' prattling had begun to press into his ears and brain with sharp annoyance. Lifting his arms, Kamukura sharply punctured both Kurokuma and Shirokuma's heads. Digging through the tangled wire, Kamukura located their cores and tugged hard. Electricity jolted weakly and the speakers spluttered.

"What, what? Am I being too noisy for you?" Enoshima's electronic voice slyly asked. "Or, are you forcing yourself to feel something?"

Kamukura's eye twitched. Did Enoshima believe apathy ran through his veins? That he wasn't human because he couldn't find joy in the world she'd attempted to create?

"Oh well. I suppose I'll leave the rest to you. Though, the next time I see you you'll be someone else entirely. I hope the future is one you cannot predict."

With a final jerk of his arms, Kamukura pulled the cores free. The light in the bears' eyes died instantly, leaving the heads as nothing more than hollow metal husks.

"The final stage of her plans..." Kamukura muttered.

He wasn't under any obligation to follow her plans. Kamukura gripped the metal tightly. Tensing his arm, Kamukura readied himself to throw it to the ground and crush it under his heels, ruining Enoshima's plans.

"I hope the future is one you cannot predict." Enoshima's final words echoed in his brain.

Kamukura lowered his arm and stared at the metal in his hands. Possibilities for an unknown future always lingered, the margin of error forever a sliver hovering out of reach. Hasty actions always resulted in hasty results. Throwing away a possibility irrationally was foolish.

With a rough motion, Kamukura shoved the metal into his pockets. He'd play along with Enoshima for a little longer, entertain her idea of despair and hope, and find the answers he was seeking.

Abandoning the wheelbarrow, Kamukura picked up his pace. After all, he had someone to meet and it was rude to keep others waiting.



Naegi's impressive reputation for being the one to take down Enoshima, was painfully ordinary, from his hair to his Future Foundation suit. Under Kamukura's gaze Naegi flinched, kicking some loose stones from the dilapidated building. The stones echoed along with the wind whistling through the cracked openings and Naegi visibly jolted. If Enoshima were present she would have mocked him. Kamukura pressed his lips together and waited for Naegi to reconnect their gazes. This time, Naegi slightly straightened his posture.

"You're Izuru Kamukura, right?"

Kamukura raised an eyebrow. "You sought me out. Do you not know who I am?"

A sheepish smile flashed across Naegi's face. "Sorry, you're right. I'm Makoto Naegi."

"I know."

"Ah, of course, you know me," Naegi muttered. "Anyways, now that introductions are over, would you mind coming with me to Jabberwock Island?"

Kamukura stared. "What happens if I say no?"

Naegi bit his lip. "I'm honestly not sure. I didn't think this through but that's because I'm certain you'll say yes."

Naegi smiled without hesitation, without anguish or a half-baked attempt at reassurance. It didn't attempt to mask sorrow or desperation. It didn't attempt to pompously sprout false ideals. No, he smiled out of belief everything would work out, that hope wasn't lost.

Kamukura's mind paused and something deep inside cracked open. Somehow, Enoshima had managed to find someone who completely opposed her. Laughter, foreign and bubbly, attempted to form in his throat. That had to be it; this was true despair. All her plans and efforts were wasted because some hapless nobody managed to spread hope the same way Enoshima had spread despair.

Perhaps, this was the interesting factor Enoshima had spoken of. The metal in his pockets coldly burned. A small wave of interest bubbled inside Kamukura's chest. It slightly itched to do as Naegi asked, but it was a small price to pay if Kamukura received an answer to the questions that floated in his mind.

"I'll come along."



For funerals, Kamukura supposed it could have been worse. Electronic lights mimicked candles enclosing Kamukura in a cocoon of artificial fireflies. Machines beeped a flat rhythmic melody that replaced choral hymns. Instead of a congregation there was only Naegi. And instead of a coffin, a cold metal pod, hooked to multiple cords and computers.

Kamukura's arm twitched but the space of the pod limited his motions. Fingers curled around thin air. The USB was long out of his grasp, plugged in and waiting silently. A ticking time bomb to an outcome of either hope or despair. It was a shame that technically he wouldn't learn the answer.

Beeps from the computer grew louder. White light began to fill his vision. Soon, the sounds began to blur, fading into nothing.

Kamukura closed his eyes.





magnolia propagation

by ed

The overhead lights burn your eyes, daring you to avert your gaze, if only for a brief respite. To your left, a dominating, suffocating presence that threatens to overwhelm your senses. To your right, you catch rapid movement in your peripherals.

You force yourself to lay still, so very still. Counting the seconds as they pass you like bees flitting from flower to flower.

Your stomach tenses, your adrenal medulla quick to action. The fleeting rush of epinephrine goes nowhere. It will never go anywhere ever again.

You breathe. In for four, hold for four, exhale for eight.

You exhale from your nose in gentle, controlled puffs. Arms crossed primly over your chest to avoid touching the edges of the small pod you currently lay in.

You had insisted they leave you in your suit- frankly they had no chance of opposition; you would not budge and they had a rather limited timeline to work with.

Great care had been put into your “accommodations”, much to the medical team’s quiet dismay. The pillow your head rests atop is soft as lily petals, pleasantly firm padding intended to keep your spine aligned properly, the sheets you had foregone, of a high thread count.

None of this allowed you the privilege of forgetting your place. Nothing could ever distract you from the current situation at hand.

But, you could take a moment to center yourself. You could retreat into your memories, to a simple interaction you keep revisiting as of late. Once more for the sake of it.

You breathe. In for four, hold for four, exhale for eight.

Ikusaba solemnly trails behind her dearest twin with an air of graveness only befitting of a pallbearer. Ever vigilant of the dead girl walking’s safety. Ever uncaring for the brevity of her own life.

In all the battles she’d fought, she stubbornly rebelled against a simple, well-known doctrine of life: people live only to save themselves.

Her downcast eyes, flickering around the pair periodically before returning her attention to her charge. She makes eye contact with you for only a moment, gray eyes hollow like a corpse.

— It isn’t out of shyness, though she often struggled to interact with her upperclassmen- and you of all people had given her ample reason to be fearful.

No, it isn’t that at all.

She appears to look right through you. Not as a human observing an ant make its miserable march up and down their arm- but as one spectre to another.

Enoshima never was one for sentimentality (as her baffling outbursts of affection belied a great capacity for cruelty), perhaps in spite of that, she was given a reason to keep Ikusaba close to her side.

All evidence points to her actions to be in an effort to serve her own ulterior motives... Even now you can’t say for sure what truly drove Enoshima’s side of their relationship. Love and devotion or responsibility and superintendence?

Ikusaba loved her sister like Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the hill. Tirelessly and without reaping any benefit.

(A lesson in futility, you dutifully noted).

Caring for something had made Ikusaba’s despair all the more poignant and in the end, Ikusaba’s family gifted her a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Meanwhile, Enoshima had continued to chase the high she’d experienced after eliminating her beloved. Consciously or not. While Ikusaba hadn’t directly been able to fill Enoshima with despair, time proved her to be the twin who kept her promises.

You breathe. In for four, hold for four, exhale for eight.

“This life is rather pointless... But I’ve found something that makes it worthwhile.”

Enoshima’s cherry acrylics scratched delicately at your scalp, a theoretically soothing action, only intended to inspire unease.

Like this you are easily manipulated with a tight-gripped tug. It’s equal parts control and humiliation she’s after.

You’ve learned at this point that it is easier to disappoint her with an absence of reaction to her antics.

“You want in, right? Oh, maybe want isn’t the right word~! You don’t want anything at all, right, Kamukura-senpai?”

Her fingers twisted, harshly tugging the hair closest to your scalp.

“But even if you have no wants, I’m so, so very nice. I’ll just give it to

you on a silver platter, if you can be good for me I can give you everything you need.”

You smack her hand away, the sound of flesh striking flesh and her shocked giggles irritate you greatly. She smiles like she’s already won.

“When you give in,” she says, an unshakable certainty in her voice, “you’ll know exactly what to do.”

Back then, she never promised to cure you, she’d actively made you worse, all things considered. But her efforts had borne fruit for a time. Yes, for a time observing despair had made things momentarily interesting.

Despair was simply an overabundance of emotion with nowhere to go; rotting as an apple at the base of a tree would.

You will...

“To give yourself to such stimulating despair!” you understand the words she’d shrieked in ecstasy so long ago.

And yet? Even now, at this ill-fated time, you can’t empathize with Ikusaba’s motivations.

Your heart rate accelerates as the Future Foundation nurses slip the mask over your nose and mouth. It takes everything for you to not run away. The helplessness is painfully familiar.

Everything was proceeding exactly as planned. The others in their pods unaware, the nurses and doctors unaware, the Fourteenth Division especially so.

And why wouldn’t they be? You had gone with them upon your own freewill. All of this was your doing.

A nurse rests their hand atop your scalp, gently scratching in an effort to assuage your anxiety. You don’t have the energy to fight them off. Maybe they’re aware of the source of your turmoil?

You doubt it. The only person who had ever understood you was rotting in an abandoned building hundreds of kilometers away.

A heady cocktail of feelings swirls deep within and you are no longer left to wonder as the doctors begin to count down.

You know what this emotion is.

Emptiness joy.

You submit to the desire to laugh as tears leak from the corners of your eyes, hot, so very hot as they dampen the hair at your temples.

You’d meet her again, of that you can be sure. Neither truly as

yourselves. But you would.

But, for now... as much as it filled you with dread, you didn’t have to be yourself.

You could become someone who cared. Someone capable of understanding Ikusaba.

Someone who cared if hope or despair prevailed over the other.









serendipity

by chuwuyas

The first person he encountered on his journey was Nagito Komaeda. Naturally.

Of course, considering the white-haired man's talent, that was already to be expected. Kamukura had *seen* Komaeda's luck in action before, so he knew how it worked —extremely good luck, then extremely bad. An endless loop. A vicious cycle.

When Kamukura came across Komaeda on one of his many night walks, shortly after he decided to put into effect his plan to recruit the Remnants of Despair into his sadistic little game between hope and despair, he knew the man's luck had returned to strike. It was an already expected outcome. He wasn't surprised.

What a *boring* first encounter.

"Greetings, Kamukura-kun," said the white-haired man with a toothy grin that was way too wide to be considered sane, standing on top of concrete rubble with his arms wide apart and spirals swirling inside his ashy eyes. Behind him, Towa City burned down in flames. "To what do I owe you the honor of this pleasant visit?"

Quite honestly, convincing Komaeda to join him was easy, maybe the easiest of them all. All he had to do was say the word "hope" and the man was immediately on board, saying that he would do anything for the sake of hope and that no matter how great the despair, hope would always eventually win (of course, Kamukura already knew that. After all, why else would the man be so okay with falling into despair, if not for the shining hope that would eventually follow?). Predictable. *Boring*.

Regardless, Komaeda Nagito was a valuable and pivotal piece on his board, and when the fateful time came, his presence would be necessary for his game to succeed.



For his plan to succeed, Kamukura needed first to get the most complicated, dangerous, and influential characters on his side.

Finding Kuzuryu and Pekoyama was quite easy —they were always together back at Hope's Peak Academy, so he figured it would remain that way. He couldn't say he was expecting Nidai and Owari to have stuck with the pair, however.

As soon as he stepped onto the Kuzuryu grounds, three shadows crossed his vision and he found himself caught in an ambush.

He sighed.

How predictable.

Fighting all the three of them, although slightly inconvenient, wasn't all that troublesome. He stood his ground and won the fight by staying only in the defensive, waiting until the perfect opportunity to speak up.

Once he found it, he took it.

"I would like to request a meeting with Kuzuryu."

Pekoyama charged forward, ready to strike Kamukura with her sword, but was interrupted by Kuzuryu himself. The blond man stepped out from his hideaway in the shadows and lifted a hand, causing her to immediately stop in her tracks.

"Hold on," said the mafioso. The swordswoman instantly obliged, putting her sword back in its sheath. "I'm interested."

Kamukura watched the interaction in silence, then nodded once he found a gap to speak. "I'm organizing an experiment," he said in an even, steady voice, wrapping his fingers together in front of his body. "A game of sorts between hope and despair. And I would like your attendance."

Kuzuryu hummed, mirroring Kamukura's pose. "Is that so?" He gestured vaguely. "Go on."

With a nod, the red-eyed male explained his goals —how he wished to see which was best and how much despair one would have to go through before giving up hope completely, or how confident one would have to be to believe that, no matter how great the despair, hope would always triumph.

A sick and twisted game for his own entertainment that happened to need other people to succeed.

Kuzuryu took his time to contemplate the proposal, internally analyzing the pros and cons of the game as he chewed on his lips and hummed. Then, once he finally concluded, he grinned at Kamukura.

"Well," he said, extending his hand towards Kamukura. The man didn't grab it. "Seems like we have a deal."

Once he was in, Pekoyama was quick to follow in his steps. And not wanting to be left behind, so did Owari and Nidai as well.

Kamukura wasn't surprised.



Sonia Nevermind was a ruler.

Finding Sonia proved to be one of the easiest parts of his extensive and elaborate plan—all he had to do was glance at a TV and he would see her. It wasn't rare to see her face on billboards and advertisements, nor was it rare to see her speeches being shown on television. Esteemed and influential, Sonia Nevermind was a beacon wherever she was, drawing all eyes to her beauty, stage presence, and soothing voice.

Dangerous.

Standing afar from the crowd as Sonia gave yet another one of her recurrent speeches, Kamukura carefully watched as she smoothly moved around the stage, eliciting thrilled cheers from the seemingly endless crowd with every word she spoke. Behind her, hidden from the crowd, but still visible to Kamukura's keen eyes, a camera flashed at random intervals of time, drawn to the motion, he peered at the person who wielded said object and was also an important piece on his board.

Mahiru Koizumi was a follower.

He couldn't say he was surprised when he learned that Koizumi and Sonia had stuck together after the world's fall, no—Sonia was prestigious and Koizumi sought fame, for she knew that fame brought her more opportunities to show her talent and spread her name across the world. Like a leech, she fed on Sonia's power, and like any kind monarch, Sonia let her. An equivalent exchange. Power for fame.

An odd duo with a twisted consensus that worked surprisingly well if you asked Kamukura.

Once the speech was over, he approached them backstage, easily sneaking his way into Sonia's dressing room without anyone trying to stop him. Koizumi sat comfortably on an old sofa while Sonia removed her earrings in front of her vanity. Sonia was the first one to notice him, glancing at him through the mirror.

"Ah, Kamukura-sama. What a pleasant surprise," she said with a warm, welcoming smile. She didn't seem bothered by him. *Dangerous.* "I believe you are here to discuss business, yes? May you join us for tea?"

He studied her posture for any signs of threat before averting her gaze and walking to the tea table in silence. Sonia and Koizumi soon joined him. They discussed business, and when Kamukura made his proposal, Sonia's eyes sparkled with unsettling malice. Once she was on board, Koizumi soon joined her.

Dangerous.



If finding some of the others was complicated, finding Soda was...

Surprisingly easy.

Of course, it wasn't like the man was *actively* trying to hide like Kuzuryu or Pekoyama were doing, but he was still keeping himself in the shadows and flying under the radar for his personal goals. However, when Kamukura heard the rumors about a former ultimate working on a mechanical workshop and producing Monokumas, it wasn't hard to connect the dots and follow the trail.

Considering the circumstances, Soda's workshop was... Unexpectedly clean.

Naturally, there were wires, dismantled animatronic pieces, and grease everywhere, but other than that, all the parts Soda used to build the robots were in their correct places. Quite honestly, it was impressive.

Sitting behind an extensive desk cluttered with tools, the former ultimate mechanic worked on a Monokuma as Kamukura patiently explained his plan to him.

Once he was done talking, Kamukura fell silent and waited for an answer. However, instead of questions, what he got was the mechanic removing his welding helmet and turning on his heels to give Kamukura a look. "Is Miss Sonia in? Kuzuryu? Nidai?"

"They are," Kamukura nodded slowly.

Soda hummed, returning to his job. "Alright, then I'm in too."

A beat. Kamukura blinked. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. I think it will be fun," the pink-haired man said with a chuckle. "Besides, I'll get to see my former classmates again and work on things other than these goddamn bears. I only see advantages."

Another beat passed. After a moment, Kamukura nodded quietly once more. "Very well."

So, so predictable.

Certain humans were so, so predictable.

Sentiment.

Human error.



If getting Soda was easy, Tanaka was the hardest to reach.

By the time they had reached him, Kamukura had already quite the intricate cast on his side —the luckster, the Yakuza, the swordswoman. The fighters, the ruler, the followers. He was already more than halfway to his goal. Eight down, six to go.

Finding him wasn't hard, but *getting* to him was.

Tanaka had an *army* of wild animals protecting him.

Wolves, lions, elephants, hawks. Not counting the giant serpent wrapped around his torso. Sure enough, the animals weren't aggressive, but everywhere Kamukura looked, he could see gloomy red eyes glowing at him from the shadows, silently watching each one of his steps, following him with close attention. Quite honestly, it was disturbing —it made him feel uneasy, but those were *Tanaka's* grounds, so there was nothing he could do.

He found Tanaka sitting on a fancy, sophisticated throne with two sleeping tigers by his feet, as well as the serpent around his torso. Once he approached him, the man gave him a measured look, carefully studying his body language for any signs of threat. When he found none, he hummed.

"What do you wish for?"

Kamukura hummed as well. "To make a proposal."
"About what?"

"A game of sorts," the red-eyed man said. "Between hope and despair. "Good" and "evil", if you will."

"Hm," Tanaka hummed. He crossed his legs and leaned on his throne in a relaxed way. "Proceed."

Kamukura nodded and complied. He carefully explained his plan, making sure to pinpoint the most crucial parts of it, and waited for the verdict.

It took two hours and forty-five minutes to convince him, but eventually, he gave in and agreed to be part of Kamukura's sick game with the only condition that he would have prestige and that his animals would be safe. Kamukura, of course, easily obliged.

And so, seven more to go.



He knew it was a trap the moment he stepped into the abandoned movie theater.

Predictable, Kamukura thought as he walked further into the darkness.

Predictable, boring, and so utterly naive.

Regardless, he would still humor them. After all, he needed them at his side.

So, he let himself walk into the trap despite already knowing what awaited him. Further and further into the eerie darkness, further and further into the dusty air that made it hard to breathe. Like those of a cat, his eyes were quick to adjust themselves to the pitch-black darkness, catching glimpses of the silhouettes moving in the darkness that other people most likely wouldn't be able to see.

Once he reached the exact middle of the theater, Kamukura stopped and waited. He mentally started a countdown. Once it hit zero, with perfect timing, the blinding lights of the theater came on and the first chord from an excruciatingly loud guitar echoed through the establishment.

He dodged the first attack easily.

All he had to do was move his head two inches to the side and the fan with metal sticks hit the air next to his neck flatly. He felt the sharp blade kissing his skin and opening a very superficial cut on his jaw, but he didn't care enough to wince in pain. His attacker, Saionji, laughed loudly and tried to hit him again, only to miss once more. She then pouted and humphed, starting to get angry.

"*Hey!*" She exclaimed, her sharp voice stinging Kamukura's ears along with the loud guitar. "*Fight back!*"

He did not. Instead, he easily grabbed her arm mid-air when she tried to attack him again and stopped her. He gripped her arm firmly, trapping her in place. "I have a proposal to make."

She glared at him for a moment before grunting, pulling her arm away from his grip. "Well? Then don't just stand there looking at me like a creep!"

Kamukura hummed and nodded quietly before turning his gaze away from the dancer. "Mioda," he addressed the other girl, still on stage but no longer playing her guitar. "Won't you join us?"

Mioda hesitated for half a second, looking unsure between Kamukura and Saionji before smiling and striking an exaggerated pose. "Okie-Dokie!"

It didn't take long for him to convince them —all he had to do was promise them success and safety and they were on board. And thus, two more down.

Three to go.





Hospitals send chills down Kamukura's spine.

A *remnant of the past*, he figured as he walked down the long and cold corridors of one of the many abandoned hospitals of the forsaken Towa City. Back when he was still being used as a guinea pig by corrupted people, back when he would have dozens of needles stuck in his skin every day just for the sake of it. A muscle memory from the not-so-good old days.



Hospitals were unnerving, but there wasn't much he could do in that situation —he *needed* her, so he needed to go through it.

He walked in silence, but the sound of his footsteps hitting the cracked tiles echoed through the halls in an agonizingly loud way. If he tried hard enough, he could hear his blood running through his veins and his heart beating oddly fast inside his chest.

She found him before he could find her.

"Oh?" A feminine voice came from somewhere on his right, sickeningly sweet, uncanny. He turned to face the glimmering purple eyes glowing in the dim light of one of the abandoned rooms. "Are you here for a check-up?"

He flinched, but didn't let it show in his features. Nodding quietly, he followed her inside the room and laid down on a stretcher as she instructed him. Once he was laying down, Tsumiki gave him a wide smile and lifted her hand, showing him a syringe filled with a transparent liquid.

Kamukura instantly froze.

Retreat.

He grabbed her wrist in the air to keep her from touching him, gaining a soft squeak from her.

"I have a proposal to make."

She eyed him skeptically for a moment, but slowly nodded to let him proceed. He did.

All he needed to do was say the words "Junko Enoshima" and she was immediately in.

And thus, he took the first steps towards the last two pieces of his board.



Whether it was luck or a coincidence, he found them together.

Not *together*, per se. At least not how he found Sonia and Koizumi or Mioda and Saionji. But the Ultimate Impostor, going by the name "Mitarai Ryota", was found in the same area as Hanamura, so it was easy to get both of them in the same establishment for a joint meeting.

At any other time, the familiar restaurant he found himself sitting in would've been cozy. But at that moment, with dusty tables, dirty floor, and broken windows, not so much.

Mitarai sat silently across from him, staring straight ahead with narrow, piercing eyes. Kamukura stared back. Neither of them talked until Hanamura joined them at the table with two bowls filled with a doubtful-looking brownish liquid. The other man soon started eating it. Kamukura didn't.

"So," the chef began, resting his chin on his hand and smirking. Kamukura didn't miss the way his eyes darted downwards because he wasn't eating his dish. "What's your proposal?"

"A simple game," Kamukura told him with a nod. "I wish to see which one would triumph between hope and despair."

A beat passed. "Okay, I'm on board," Hanamura simply said with a shrug.

... *That easily?*

Unsure, Kamukura arched an eyebrow and opened his mouth to question him, but was cut by the chef grinning and lifting his hand to stop him.

"... *If you eat the dish.*"

... *Of course.*

The taller man sighed, nodding quietly. "Very well," he said before grabbing the chopsticks to start eating the... *Thing*.

After that, it didn't take long to convince Mitarai to also join him —he just had to promise protection and a new identity and he was in. *Checkmate*. All of his pieces were in place for the main game to begin.

And he was *aching* to see the outcome.

The silence as Makoto Naegi escorted the Remnants of Despair through the long corridor towards the pod room, where they would be put into the Neo World Program, was deafening —not the type of silence where you could hear your heartbeat, but the type of silence where you could hear your thoughts. And Kamukura's thoughts, at that moment, were *excruciatingly* loud.

Hope and despair. Happiness and sorrow. Good and evil. Black and

white.

He pondered; was it really that simple?

Was it really that *boring*?

(Soon, he would find the answer.)

He watched with keen, attentive eyes as doctors and nurses helped the Remnants into their respective pods, assisting with their dive into the virtual program. Once his turn came, he allowed the nurses to help him into the large green machine, and once laid down, a single thought ran through his mind.

Which one would win?

Gripping a hairpin that was still unfamiliar, yet oddly comforting, he closed his eyes and let the machinery sound lull him to sleep.





execution

by jack

The boat rocks gently, and Kamukura has to concentrate on every minute muscle movement to keep his balance as perfectly as he does.

He has picked far more difficult locks than this one. Normally, he'd just break down the door, but sometimes it's necessary not to leave any trace of entry. He's using hairpins that the Future Foundation foolishly hadn't taken away from him, masterfully bent into the exact shape he requires for this task.

He'd left the Servant sleeping in their shared cell, curled up on the floor and snoring lightly. He would have wanted to come, and would have inundated Kamukura with relentless, irritating question after question. And if he'd found out about the thumbdrive, tucked carefully into Kamukura's breast pocket, he would have stopped at nothing to get it. It would be a troublesome occurrence, to state the least. But more than that, nobody else has the right to do this. Nobody but Kamukura.

His mind drifts to a time he'd picked a lock with Komaeda by his side, breaking into Enoshima's room. He can remember it with crystal clarity, the way his hook had slid easily into the lock, as he applied careful tension to the wrench. He can recount the feeling of all six pins, the exact motions it had taken to pick the lock. He can still hear Komaeda's breathless giggle as the lock had turned open with a gratifying click, the door swinging open to reveal her empty room.

No, the Servant would just be a deterrent here. Especially with how utterly consumed he's been in his own personal despair.

Kamukura has felt despair from the first moment he can remember. Trapped in that cold, empty room, his only company to be found in those worthless vermin who'd experimented on him. But the worst of it had been brought to him by her, because at first she'd offered hope. Even in his mind, he almost snarls her name. He curses her- if it hadn't been for Enoshima's existence, maybe he could have found hope. There were times when he was close, so desperately close. But even in death, her rot has spread through the world, poisoning it, poisoning almost every person he perhaps could have found value in. A bitterness, an endless rage that lives in even Kamukurahimself.

No, there can be no hope for a creature such as himself. That's what has brought him here, to the door hiding the backup servers for the Neo World Program. That undeniable, concrete fact.

He can never find happiness in this world, and he's unable to die. He can only erase his existence.

The final pin won't click into place. He scrubs the pins harder, his jaw tightening, applying even more tension to the lock. The hairpin snaps.

He reaches into his pocket, and instead of another slim, fragile pin, he pulls out Nanami's hairpin.

He doesn't know why he's careful as he slides it into the keyway. There's no real reason that now, when he tries again, the final pin slides into place easily, like he's being welcomed in. It's just useless sentimentality for someone he can't remember.

The door swings open soundlessly. The only noise in the entire corridor, empty and dark, is Kamukura's breathing. He inspects Nanami's hairpin for damage, finding only a slight scratch in the metal that can be buffed away easily. It's far sturdier than it looks. He tucks everything away. Perhaps he should feel guilty about what he's about to do, but he's never cared about having the moral high ground. No, this is a purely selfish act, driven by hatred.

He's alone, as he steps into the room. If he believed in fate, maybe he would think that he is destined to always be alone, but it's not that. It's just a core part of his nature. He's a monster, and love, friendship, hope- they're nothing but foolish concepts, leading to inevitable ruin. He's seen it happen again and again, watched despair as it eats away at people, slowly killing them from the inside.

Kamukura is not going to let that happen to him. He'd rather die by his own hand, using her as a tool the same way she'd used him. It's the best he can do, now that she's already dead.

He closes the door behind him and locks it, before he makes his way to the servers. There's a laptop already open on a desk. He turns it on, the light from the screen illuminating his soft features. His face is almost expressionless, a faint sneer of disgust that would be imperceptible to most people.

Naegi had been foolish to think he'd ever let himself be contained again. He'll never be trapped again, not by anyone, not for a concept as worthless as hope.

He decompresses her files, and uploads her AI. It's a dormant virus right now, a slumbering monster just as twisted and dark as he himself is. It's only a shame that he won't be able to see what happens. The only sound in the room is his quiet breathing, and the rapid clicking of his fingers on the keyboard.

Finally, he'll be erased from the world. Hajime Hinata can deal with the aftermath- Kamukura himself won't be a part of it. He doesn't care about the consequences.

When he's done, he returns to his cell. There's not a trace of him ever having left. He despises the claustrophobically small room, but he sits back down against the wall. His hair falls in front of his eyes, hiding his surroundings except for a small sliver.

The Servant is drooling, hugging her severed arm to his chest. It's disgusting how people worship her, even long after her death.

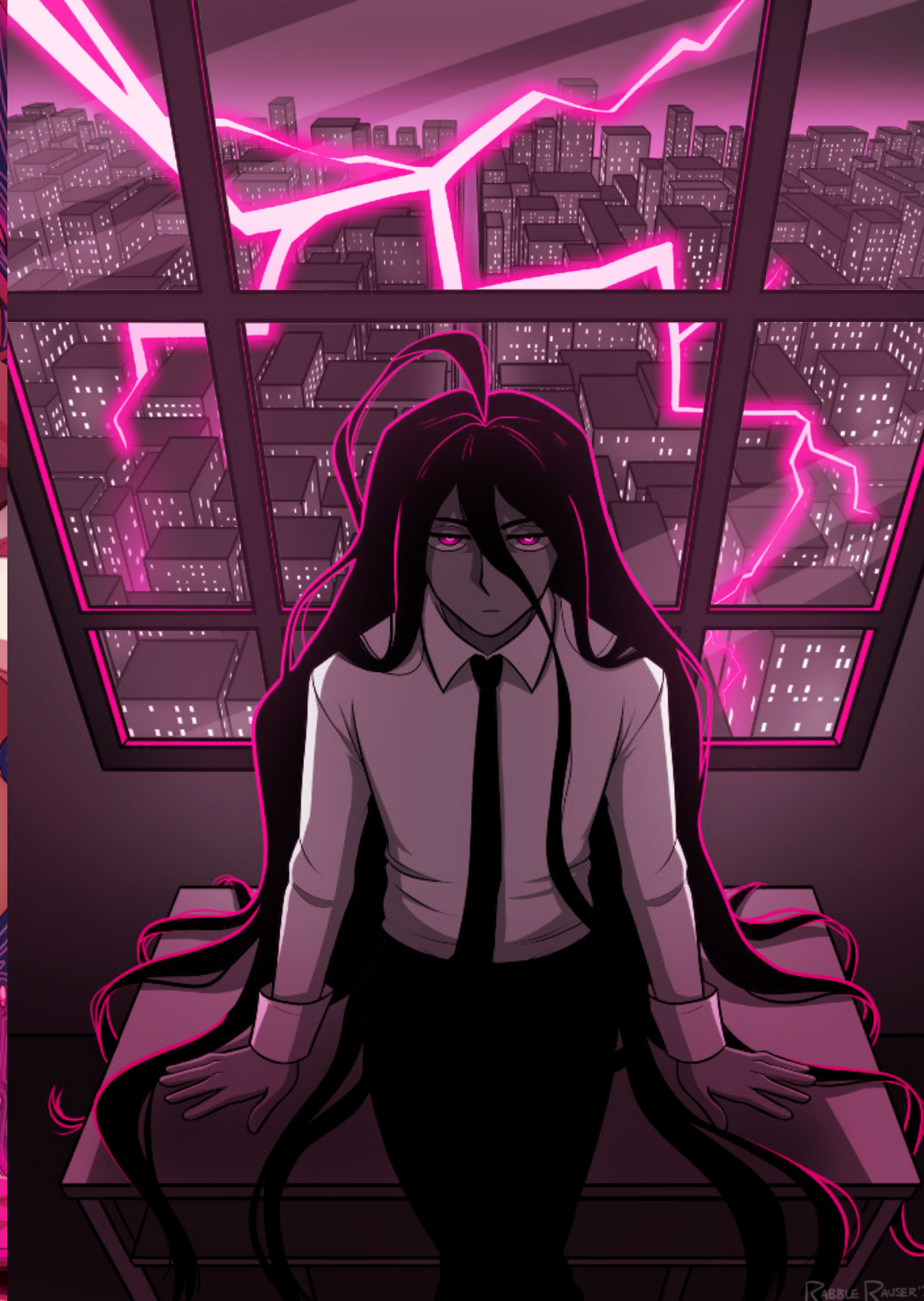
Kamukura doesn't consider for a moment that in his own way, she's just as much of a god to him. A god of hatred and nausea and bitterness, who will punish her followers, punish anyone who thinks they can dare bring him hope.

After all, devotion comes in many forms.















the variable in the equation

by anantagonist, translated by akai_koutei

Tomorrow would be a great day. The first in the remainder of the lifetime he'd always envisioned. That thought had him staring at the same sterile, sky-blue wall since... who knew how long. He'd watched the sunlight go down until the only illumination left was the cold, fluorescent light pouring in from the hospital hallway.

He knew he had to sleep, but his eyes refused to stay shut. The rumbling from his stomach interrupted the heavy silence and shoved him back to reality as well. Hinata breathed in deep and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, once again perceiving the sweet and fresh aroma that had accompanied him since morning. It soothed his body, not his mind, but he made an effort to relax his every muscle and lie down, closing his eyes for sleep...

It hadn't even been twenty seconds when he opened them again, finding there upon the nightstand the three simple white lilies, almost perfectly lined up with the strip of light that filtered through the ajar door.

He sat up, letting out a grunt of frustration. If he wasn't going to be able to sleep from the insistent thoughts, then he'd get up and think them. But the sound of shuffling feet startled him, directing his attention to his doorway, where a dark silhouette peeked in.


"Oh, I hope I didn't wake you up. Sorry. I'm just looking for the bathroom." The voice came as a murmur, though Hinata doubted such a feeble tone could be raised much higher.

"It's fine, I wasn't sleeping. Use my bathroom if you want." As his eyes adjusted to the contrast of lights, he could finally see that the tall, slender boy with tousled pale hair was wearing a hospital gown just like his own. "The other ones are too far at the end of the hall, you'll get cold wandering around that much. Just use mine," he insisted, noticing his own mind's celebration for any distracting stimulus.

"You have your own bathroom? That means you're not just in and out... you've been admitted. Right?" The door opened some more, pushed by the boy's pale hand.

"Yeah... and I'm kinda nervous, getting surgery tomorrow..." He hesitated a moment. "I know it's late but... if you're not tired or don't have anything to do, mind helping me distract myself a little?"

"Of course I can! Excuse me." The guest exclaimed, with a wide smile on his face. His feet dragged his slippers a little, and with strange confidence for someone who'd seemed so polite, he sat at the feet of the bed, facing Hinata. "I'll help distract you. What type of surgery will it be?"



"T-That doesn't distract me! It's the complete opposite!" His voice rose a little too much, just shocked about someone so upfront. Past the surprise, he furrowed his brow a little and crossed his legs to give the other boy more bed space.

"Speaking about our fears helps us dissipate them. Normalize and rationalize them, you could say." Something about him was catching Hinata's attention. He didn't know if it was the simplicity in his words, the strangeness of his looks or the fact that he seemed so relaxed and happy. "See, you're in Hope's Peak, which means you'll be under the care of the best medics of the world, even Ultimates work here. You should be feeling honored to be at this hospital."

Hinata's brow furrowed more profoundly, cautious of assuming too much but still feeling his pride touched. "How do you know I'm not an Ultimate myself? I'm at Hope's Peak, precisely."

"I don't perceive you as one... Ultimates are special, unique, and you're... very common." The guest replied with a weak laugh.

Hinata grumbled, defensively raising his voice as he blurted out, without thought, "Well, the procedure is just what'll make me one!"

"That's impossible... just like a penguin can't up and fly, no matter how hard it may try to, a normal person won't turn into an Ultimate. That simply doesn't happen."

"So they'll make it happen. I'll be an Ultimate."

The certainty in his words left the boy before him in a thoughtful mood for a while. At least, he was making him consider it.

"That sounds interesting. Especially that you're so willing to discard who you are, to become someone totally different. An upgrade, without a doubt! But still an intrepid act that few people would carry out."

"I don't see it as discarding myself... though if it's what I have to do to be someone talented... so be it. I'll be someone interesting, with an exciting life." Hinata had already forgotten his nerves and let himself be carried away by the conversation. "I know it's gonna be something that changes my life. Even if I don't even know what talent it's gonna be... Ultimate Hope was the assigned title, and it sounds so... vague."

"It sounds hopeful!" The boy gave a measured laugh. "Though redundant. Like an Ultimate Ultimate."

An Ultimate among Ultimates? Something like the most talented among the talented? The mere idea was vertiginous, at least.

Hinata cleared his throat, a little embarrassed, shooting the other a quick glance before lowering his eyes again. "W-What do you mean redundant? I think an Ultimate Hope could be just about anything, right?"

"An Ultimate, in itself, is someone who bears within them the capacity to give hope to humankind. Ultimates are symbols of hope by their own existence. That's what I mean. The Ultimate Hope would be... well, the greatest Ultimate ever known."

The explanation didn't clear up much, but did give him some confidence, as he felt himself being taken seriously. Though 'hope' didn't sound like a talent in itself, and he'd considered the possibility of it being something abstract, such as the operation 'opening the ducts through which talent could flow' and allowing him to learn one. Or, less excitingly, that he'd be the literal hope that someone common could obtain talent.

"Okay, hope for humankind... but *what* do you think my talent's gonna be, then? 'Hope'... I guessed it could be something like becoming a 'born leader' that gives hope to other people around, or it could be something science-related, like curing diseases, discovering new planets..." The excitement made him raise his voice a little again. "Maybe the Ultimate Hope would be a super scientist or something... or a super medic."

With his face lit up by a large smile, the guest immediately joined in on the speculations. "Ultimate Athlete! Perhaps that talent would make you capable of performing any physical task without fail, to become something like a super fireman or super soldier, who could also bring hope to many people."

"And that'd make me the best at any sport too, right?!" The idea didn't seem bad at all, then. The array of exciting and amazing talents opened itself wider before his eyes, and fantasizing, at least, was free.

The two of them kept on playing with the possibilities, speaking excitedly until the curtains began to light up with the first lights of the morning and his guest retired to his own room, leaving him with an expectant smile on his face.



"You've been reborn, like a phoenix from its ashes. We will call you Izuru Kamukura, in honor of our founder."



The sun began to approach the horizon, making the line of destroyed buildings of Towa City grow darker, until nothing but black and broken shapes could be seen among the columns of smoke. The boy with long black hair and matching suit walked while pushing a wheelbarrow before him. Despite him not uttering a word, silence was the last thing surrounding him. Inside the wheelbarrow, among withered orange petals,

debris and dirt, rested the animatronic heads of two bears.

Their mechanical voices hadn't shut up for one second since Kamukura had picked them up, and a migraine had appeared once they'd gotten to fighting and fake-crying. Soon his name came to mention, as the black head directed its insults at him and the white head came in his defense.

"Don't be mean, Kurokuma. He's not like that, you don't get it and you're just being mean as always. He's a victim of the situation too... poor Kamukura! Being involved in all this when he did nothing wrong..."

Kamukura let out a heavy sigh, though his voice came out as monotonous as usual. "Stop. I know how you are, don't act in front of me. It's annoying."

The laughter from the two bears rang high-pitched and grating, as though what they'd heard were the funniest joke in the world. From the growing distortion in the sound came, clearer and clearer, a voice that Kamukura already knew well: that of Junko Enoshima.

"Upupupu~ I told you so! I told you so~! Despair won in the end. The city's in chaos, despair is taking over all the survivors. Listen, listen! 'Those guys' are on their way now, but they won't manage a thing against this." It had become impossible to tell which of the two heads was speaking the words, as the voice banks had returned to their original settings.

"Chaos isn't despair," the black-haired boy sharply pointed out, adding nothing else.

"But chaos *brings* despair. C'mon, look, look closer. Look! It might surprise you, but... ah, no..." The voice interrupted itself abruptly, but then added in a clearly mocking tone. "Nothing surprises the Great Kamukura, who can predict it all!"

His steps stopped and with them the wheelbarrow ceased advancing, barely crunching the gravel under the one heavy wheel. He said nothing, but his eyes remained thoughtfully on the defenseless pair of heads, watching now as the red light in their eyes alternated from one to the other whilst they spoke.

"Ooohh? Did we say something sensitive? Or could you be making an effort to feel something? Clinging to anything to try and find at least one feeling inside your empty heart."

Despite the attempts to bother him, he remained in silence. The wind swayed his long hair, the ends of his pants and his black tie. Though he wasn't responding out loud, the answer came to mind: no. He hadn't felt something... *deja vu* wasn't a feeling, it was more a memory of an emotion he'd had before. And the bears were wrong. He could feel, in fact, he felt, and quite a lot. His problem was that he wasn't feeling what

he wanted, nor in the intensity he sought it. Frustration was a feeling, the same as apathy and disappointment. They were strong sentiments that motivated him to seek the few answers he couldn't reason for himself.

The feminine voice pulled him out of his thoughts, calm and charged with venom, the way only she'd known to speak to him in such moments of introspection, and it made his features tense up. Even being an AI, it seemed to retain not just the capacity to touch his curiosity, but also his nerves.

"The talent you have now... they gave it to you, right? You were their great project. They used you as a guinea pig and made you into this thing you hate now. Do you hate the Hope's Peak council? Do you hate that bunch of selfish, ambitious old farts?"

"No... it's a waste of energy to hate the dead. Besides, they surely gave me what I asked for."

"What was it they gave you?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"Every talent ever known to humankind."

"And that was what you wanted?"

"I don't know. I don't know who I was, I don't remember it, but I know I must've been a fool to ask for it."

"Boo-hoo! That again... selective amnesia is a crappy cliché and it's out of style!"

Kamukura didn't respond to the mockery, only picked the wheelbarrow back up and continued crossing the bridge. The AI understood it wouldn't obtain an answer, so it broke the silence anew with a short laugh.

"With all those talents, you could do anything you wanted. You should be more grateful."

"I've had no use for them."

"Hey! You could at least try! Show some motivation. Use them for yourself, have some pride, flex them in front of people, show off, have fun. Or at least smile a little, you got what you asked for, after all."

"But it doesn't make me happy... even if it's what I asked for."

"Nothing works for you! Pff... you're still on your boring stereotypes. First the amnesia, now the mysterious, bitter guy who forgot how to smile.



Upupupu!" The laughter was slightly distorted when the heads were rattled by a bump in the road, perhaps hit on purpose, perhaps not.

"Talent has brought me nothing but indifference towards the world." Ignoring the heads, Kamukura continued vocalizing his thoughts, articulating what seemed tangled in his mind and which, through being worded, unknowingly, discovered before him clues of who he had been. "It's as if they've thrown a veil over life, obscuring any interest I could have on it. Nothing is exciting when I can foresee what'll happen before I even begin, nothing scares me if I know all the answers, nothing gives me adrenaline if my body knows how to react to any situation." He glanced at the orange sky, letting the wind take his calm voice. "I live in an imposed nihilism that is barring me from happiness."

"Boo-hoo!! Go cry in the corner. Tell 'those guys' your sob story, they're sure to have some pity for the Ultimate Despair." "I don't need pity, I need them to capture me to get my answer. 'They' don't know who I am... who I was... not even I do. It's the only thing I don't know and, as such, the only variable factor I can add to the equation."

His hand distractedly went to his breast pocket, brushing the tips of his fingers over Chiaki's brooch, which he kept there. She would be the 'hope' in the equation. His gaze fell on the heads, they held what he would turn into the 'despair'. And finally... Future Foundation would add his variable.

"I know what to do... I know how to build the perfect scenario and already have all the elements. And for that reason, your time is over."

With a harsh gesture, he sunk his fists into the broken heads, among the remains of stuffing his fingers found the cables and circuits that gave the bears their artificial life.

"Ohh~ How strong~ Were we talking too much? Bothering you too much?" They spoke in unison, both in a sweet voice, interrupted by the glitches that distorted it as the cables were pulled. "Well... I'll leave the rest to you. I'm sure the next time we meet, you'll be someone totally different. Upupu... pupu... I hope you can at least have fun, and the future that comes is one you can't predict. Upupupu!"

Kamukura pulled his hands out, holding in them the important pieces. The laughter continued until the cables were fully torn away and he finally found silence.

He advanced through the streets, leaving behind the wheelbarrow with its contents, and as he went he discarded the cables and bits that were of no use, only storing two small electronic boards in his pocket.

Between one step and the other his mind began to work, never to

leave him a moment's silence. He reviewed the conversation, reliving the resentment he carried for having had his past torn from him in such a way. Even if he remembered nothing, he was sure of one thing: his old self believed in hope. The rest was only speculation, such as how naïve he must've been to fall for such a transparent hoax, but he didn't blame himself. He knew someone with ambitious dreams was someone vulnerable to tyrants such as the Hope's Peak council.

Like a wish made upon a monkey's paw, he'd received what he wanted, though the consequences had exceeded the reward. Everything that constituted his identity had been extirpated from his mind with surgical precision, his name, his emotions... they'd performed a human experiment and, ironically, removed the most vital part of his humanity.

He branched off from his path to sit at the riverbank, on the slightly overgrown and weed-riddled grass. Running his gaze over the city, he saw one of the Future Foundation's helicopters against the already-darkening sky.

His fingers moved centimeters off the ground, letting the tips of the grass blades caress his digits. The uncertain movement that tickled against the skin gave him a certain mental peace that would help him relax, though soon he moved his hand away, before he could begin to predict even that. The glossy and slightly rigid texture of the grass turned into a velvety and delicate one. He knew without even looking, from the shape of the petals and pistils, the type of flower it was.

"*Lilium candidum*," he muttered and, tearing the flower from the ground, raised it to his eyes to confirm.

The pink tone of the petals that blended into spotted fuchsia in the middle reminded him of dawn... of starting anew. As he looked aside and found a patch of the same flowers growing amongst shrubs, he found himself surprised he hadn't noticed them before. The light nightly breeze brought him a sweet, fresh and comforting perfume that reminded him of a dark room and a feeling of hopeful excitement.







titles and deeds

by cavesal amander

You wake abruptly to the sensation of tubes up your nose, down your throat, plunged into your veins, wires attached to your chest. A sudden rush of information crowds out your memories, heavily and stifling as the air around you - or, no. It's not air, but liquid pressing in around you, your every breath controlled by a mask sitting snugly over your nose and mouth, pumping filtered and recycled air into your lungs and back out again. The fluid enveloping you doesn't sting your eyes, but even wide open, there's nothing to see but green. It's impossible to tell if the dark shadows moving in the distance are humans or merely figments.

Slowly, laboriously, you lift your arm. Is it just viscosity holding you back, or are you really so weakened by the long sleep that you can no longer move with the grace and strength you could before?

Before what?

Your hand hits something flat, hard, and smooth. *Glass* is your first instinct, but a small, instructive voice in the back of your head rattles off other materials with the same properties. It brings you back into the moment.

The vague silhouette of your hand blocks some of the light filtering in from outside. You know now that the liquid is translucent, thicker than water. You push against the 'glass' and it doesn't budge, doesn't bend, but you feel a pressure at your back. The terms *neutral buoyancy* and *Newton's Third Law* present themselves, and you dismiss them, irritated that such banal concepts interrupted this distinctly new experience.

A click reverberates around you, and the surface you touched retreats. Your hand follows, breaking the surface and touching air.

It's cold.

Likely you have been kept right at the ideal body temperature while in stasis. A hand wraps around yours and pulls, dragging you up, up. Your head feels so heavy, like something is trying to pull you back, to drown in the silence and lukewarm green of that endless artificial sleep.

It's really cold. So very different from the island...

The pulling doesn't stop until your head has surfaced, the room you are in slowly coming into focus as the fluid drips from your face. It slides off of your skin and hair like water from a lotus leaf. You ignore the person in front of you initially, as you take in your surroundings. He's speaking, and though you let the words flow in, holding onto them for later, you aren't listening yet. The room is large, circular, and with a number of the... *stasis*

Pods, you decide to call them, forming a ring around a central tower spangled with bright LEDs and beeping monitors.

You must have shivered, because the young man shakes you by the shoulder and says something about blankets. *Oh, fine.* You might as well tune back in. “Hey, hey... Can you hear me? You and the others just forced a shutdown. We’re going to need you to get out of the simulation chamber. You’ve been through a lot. Come on. Are you listening? You’re cold, aren’t you? If you get out we can get you blankets, alright?”

He helps you out of the stasis pod, freeing you from the wires and tubes. Fewer than you’d imagined... *remembered?* The liquid rolls off your skin and even your clothes without sticking. A number of possible chemicals that could make up the stasis fluid flick through your mind like flashcards. You dismiss the ones that would be toxic, paring it down until—

—your legs crumple underneath you. The young man catches you under your arms, staggering under your weight. “You’ve been in the pod for over a month. You’re going to be a little weak for the next few days.”

The betrayal of your body to your intentions *infuriates* you, and you want to destroy the person helping you back to your feet for the sheer reason that he’s seen you like this. You bite back your anger, at least for now. It would be ineffective at best, self destructive at worst.

What do I remember?

You get your feet underneath your body again, and with the young man supporting most of your weight, you are led out of the simulation chamber.

A boat.

The hallway is brighter, but the lights flicker faintly with poorly connected fluorescent bulbs. Coming from any reasonably lit area, you know this narrow space would seem oppressively dark by comparison.

Maybe there was an island after all, just not that island.

He leads you to a room, and swings the door open with his free hand. A vase of pink lilies, a lone splash of color in an otherwise stark white room, sits on the bedside table. It’s not enough to mask the sterile hospital smell. You take a step back, pulling away from the young man instead of entering as he intended.

Your motion sets the young man on edge, but he stays on top of the situation, holding his hands out to placate you. “Don’t worry, Hajime.”

*That name. **That name.** No. No.*

“This is only temporary while we make sure everyone else is going to be okay.” His voice is gentle, but your glassy stare must unnerve him, because he shuffles a bit, and tries a different tactic. “There’s no telling

how the hard reset of the simulation affected everyone. Akane especially wasn’t in good condition going in, and we need to make sure she’s alright.”

When I was brought here from the boat. I didn’t struggle, then.

So you won’t struggle now, either. You nod once, and head into the room. The concerned look he gives you is not lost. You’ve made a mistake somewhere, but you’re not sure where.

The door closes behind you, and you hear the telltale click of the lock. Now, at least, you have time alone to think and to remember.

—

The earliest coherent memory you can find, untainted by restraints cutting into your wrists and legs or fogged by drugs, is of you sitting on an examination table in a thin shift. A young man, really a boy your own age, sat spread legged on a countertop, while a stern faced adult man stood by watching and taking notes.

They looked at you like a bug pinned to a corkboard, and even as you wondered where that idiom came from (as you have yet to see a bug or a corkboard) the boy already moved on to asking questions.

“What is your name?”

You reached obediently for the answer, but it disappeared, filtering through your hands like trying to hold water. Though even as you grasped for the fading syllables, you thought maybe... maybe *that* name isn’t what you were looking for anyway. You shook your head to give at least some sort of reply, to sate the impatient stares they fixed you with.

“It appears to have worked.” The note of approval in the adult’s voice was directed towards.

You would later find that assessment incorrect. That young man, who you soon learned to be Yasuke Matsuda the Ultimate Neurologist, and the much older men he worked for, valued you greatly.

“Your new name is Izuru Kamukura. Welcome to Hope’s Peak Academy.”

—

You take a deep breath, exhaling through your teeth. The memories flood back to you, the lessons you learned, those hours upon hours spent illuminated in the blue tinted glow of screens, quietly observing those world-class exceptional students as they flourished in their respective fields.

In the beginning they were astounded by how quickly you could pick up new tasks, no matter how simple they seemed to be.

"You are a true genius," they would tell you, with bright smiles on their faces. "You really will be the Ultimate Hope!"

Whenever you completed one assignment, another would be set before you, all to be performed under the unblinking eyes of cameras in all directions. The mountain of work each day blurred into one long smear of drudgery, broken only by the precious few hours you had to yourself at night.

You cherished those hours on your own, pushing away sleep for as long as possible. When you slept you became someone else: someone weak and powerless, someone with no talent and a name that you had long since thrown away. Sleep didn't come easily anyway, with the words and images from lessons earlier playing on constant repeat.

Eventually, you found one of the best methods to quiet your thoughts was to clean. Your jail cell of a room, already sterile with respect to decorations — only the portrait of the original Izuru Kamukura had been affixed to the wall to remind you of the legacy that you represented — became even more so.

As your hair grew longer, grooming it became another method of quieting your mind. This 'accelerated growth' concerned the steering committee; they wondered if it was a sign of some dangerous side effects. *A form of brain cancer*, they wondered aloud, *like that one student?* The neuroscientist's protest that dementia and cancer aren't the same thing went ignored.

The pointless conversation dragged on, and for the first time in all the meetings, you spoke up without being asked to. "My hair grows quickly because I will it to." You meant to satirize the uselessness of the conversation by offering an option too ridiculous to be possible, but the entire room fell dead silent at your words, apparently in awe of your ability.

Yasuke argued it was impossible, but they took you at your word and let you keep your hair long, so you never bothered to correct them. He later confided in you that they were all talentless idiots who he must keep happy if he wants to retain access to the lab after he graduated. In return, you told him you'd lied to prove a point, but it flew over their empty and balding heads. Finally, someone laughed at your joke.

Moments of amusement were few and fleeting. Resentment soon drowned any interest you once had in the lives of the other students, a feeling dulled only mildly when a new year of students arrived and brought with them fresh talents to study and assimilate.

The face of one of those students floats to the forefront of your mind, and you scowl with realization, snapping back to the present. *That* boring student was the very one who had led you into this room. Makoto Naegi is

the name of that young man, and Super High School Level Luck is his talent.

Or was it?

He outlasted many in the apocalypse, and though the broadcast cut out before the end of the last trial, you recall whispers of a *true* Ultimate Hope. That plain, unassuming person orchestrated the Neo World Program that could have completely counteracted the influence of despair on you and your classmates. *Would have*, without your interference.

You almost feel smug that you managed to topple his attempt to tame your classmates, but that bitter satisfaction is dulled by the aftertaste of defeat. Not at the hands of your former self. You hardly consider that a loss, as somehow the conclusion to that game surprised even you. Rather, you understand your plan to use Junko was only another way she had manipulated you into spreading her despair.

The first time you saw her, she did not particularly stand out. The start of a new school year was marked only by new footage of unfamiliar students provided to you for study, and among the subjects all were equally noteworthy. As time passed, you grew curious. Whether it was the occasional knowing smirk cast towards the cameras, or simply recognizing something in the way she watched the other students, you looked into a mirror when you looked at her. They said her talent lay in the realm of fashion but you could smell a hideous *rot* behind her prima-donna smile and layers of makeup.

Because of this, when she appeared one day casting a larger than life shadow from the door to your dark, featureless room, you were not surprised.

Because of this, when she claimed to know a salve for your endless days of boredom, you listened.

You remember her words. How she could wield them like her sister wielded knives. How she could, with a perfect smile, size up a person's insecurities and know how to twist and bend them to her will. How even though you recognized what she was capable of, you fell to her wiles. As effortlessly as reading people came to you, she shifted her entire personality the instant you thought you had her pinned down.

Yet somehow, that boring, ordinary student with only luck for talent, brought her down even at the height of her reign of terror.

Something wet seeps under your fingernails, drawing your attention away from your thoughts. Four small red crescents mark each palm from where your nails dug in, blood seeping slowly out. Resentment coils like a snake in your chest, and you let out a long breath you didn't realize you were holding. Your feelings toward Makoto are only a pale echo of the hatred you felt for *her*. However... Even with the pain dulled by the countless needle jabs and other surgeries you've endured, your body still takes

damage. These feelings are self-destructive, and will not serve you to linger on further.

Yet you cannot help but dwell, wondering what he has in store for you. Will he follow in the footsteps of your teachers at Hope's Peak, expecting you to sweep the world as a puppet of Hope? The very thought makes your skin crawl. Makoto and Junko would be no different in that regard, merely two sides of the same coin, treating you as an Othello piece to be flipped to the winning side.

'Even if this world is a game, you guys aren't part of the game.' A girl's voice calls out from a memory not your own.

That game she spoke of was the very one you yourself had set into motion. A final test, and perhaps a parting gift. Feelings and thoughts, more than words or images drift to the forefront of your mind, as you reflect on what may have happened within the simulated dream.

This outcome, you existing at all, was not one of the prearranged choices. Had all gone to plan, Makoto's hope or Junko's despair would have won. You would either remember nothing of despair, your talents, or the torment that shaped your current outlook, or you wouldn't wake at all, stuck in an eternal island dream.

The specifics elude you like a wisp of smoke, but three words are seared into your consciousness.

Create your future.

How... boring.

Yet even as you try to deny it, you are called to by a future unbound by the limitations and expectations.

From the moment you were named Izuru Kamukura, they caged you. "Izuru Kamukura" was the one they owned, the title of Ultimate Hope a collar more than an honor. Even Junko's offer of freedom was merely an illusion, the leash replaced by puppet strings, your name nothing more than a weapon to turn against the world.

The door rattles suddenly, and is thrown open with exuberance as you turn to look. "Hajime, everyone's-" Makoto trails off, looking uncertain. "Are you still standing right where I left you?"

"Hajime..." you repeat after him, slowly.

Color drains from his face, but he recovers quickly. "Would you rather I call you Izuru? Either one is alright, really. I just came to let you know the other survivors all woke up alright. The rest are comatose. Stable, but sleeping."

You don't answer his question, though it sticks in your mind like a needle. "What is your plan for us?"

"My plan?" Makoto's confusion is genuine.

Speaking slower, you elaborate. "The Neo World Program was created to cleanse us of despair. Due to my sabotage, it failed."

Makoto's lack of reaction made it clear the admission did not come as a surprise to him. "The Future Foundation won't be too happy, but we all knew how low the chance of everything going perfectly was."

"Do you intend to try again?"

"No. Besides, we have to leave. With any luck, they won't find out and it'll all blow over!"

"You're leaving us here." You let the words hang in the air.

Not an accusation, but close enough to set Makoto to reassuring you. He prattles on about how you can come along if you want, but it would be a lot more dangerous, and how really, it's not too bad here...

Your mind drifts, as the walls confining it fall away. A future you create yourself spreads out before you like an endless sea, full of possibility and *free*. Free of the contract binding your body and brain to someone else's hope. Free of the tar pit of despair, where every struggle against it just pulls you further in. Free of the shackles of bearing the title of Ultimate. In some ways, you're back where you started all those years ago, before you signed your name away to become Izuru Kamukura. In other ways, this is a new beginning.

"I will remain," you announce, breaking the silence that fell once Makoto realized you weren't entirely listening. "At least until the others wake."

Makoto's eyes brighten at your words, though he cautions, "It may never happen. They... died in virtual reality, and their brains felt it as real. It's a next to nothing chance."

"It's my own future to create. I may fail. I may succeed. Whichever outcome happens will be on my own terms, by my own hand."

"I wish you the best of luck, ah..." His smile falters uncertainly, as he scrambles for how to complete the sentence.

"Hajime," you finish for him, making your decision in the moment, but knowing it's the right one. "My name is Hajime Hinata."



merch



charm by gutter



enamel pin and candy
charm by elitandark



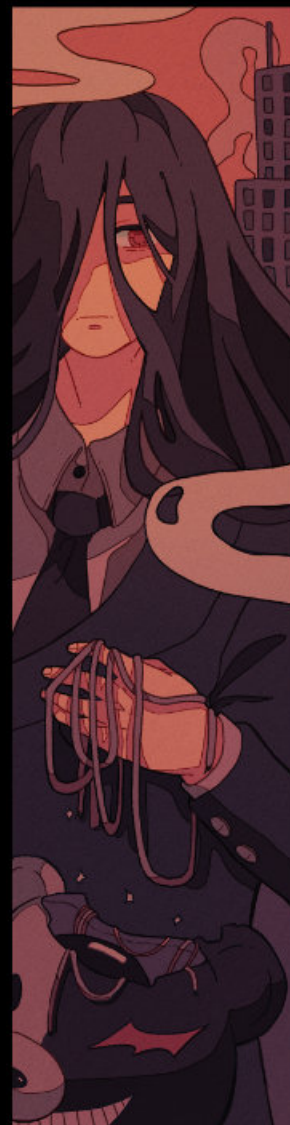
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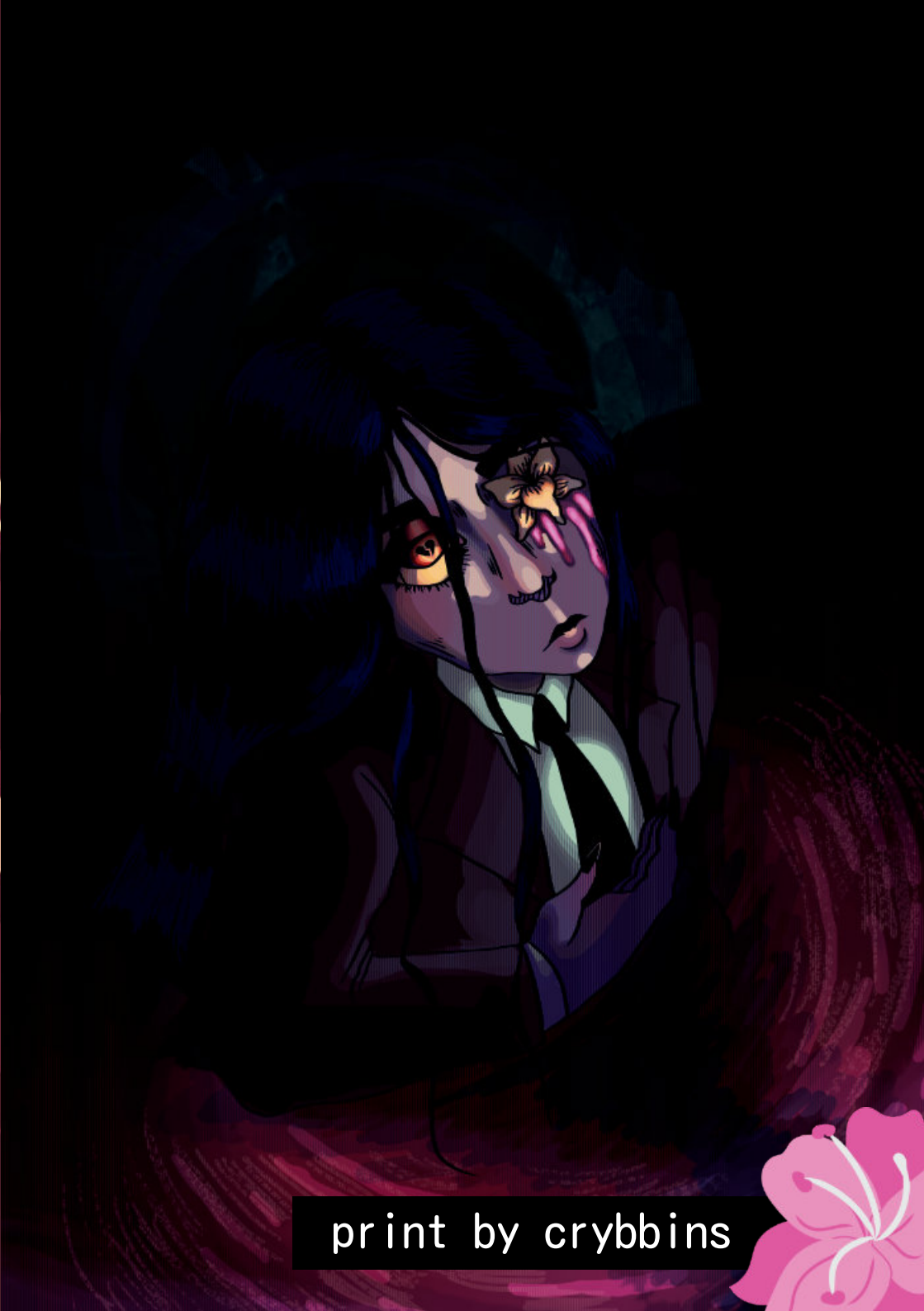


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